The Challenge of Autonomy.
The Experience of the Orkney and Shetland Movements at the 1987 General Election

By John Goodlad*

Background
The degree of autonomy enjoyed by the Shetland Islands was described in some detail in a Paper presented at the Third Seminar of the Small Nations of the North held at Kautokeino in 1985.1 This paper, which also analysed the origins and development of the Shetland Movement concluded that “the attainment of self government for Shetland in the future will probably be dependent upon the fortunes of the Shetland Movement and its performance in any election it chooses to contest”.2 In 1987 the Shetland Movement contested a General Election for the first time.

In view of the fact that Orkney and Shetland together represent one parliamentary constituency, the decision to contest the General Election required agreement between the pro-autonomy group in Orkney (the Orkney Movement) and the Shetland Movement. Since the origins, development and policy of the Orkney Movement are very similar to the Shetland Movement, it was relatively straightforward for both Movements to join forces as the Orkney and Shetland Movements (OSM) in order to consider contesting the General Election.

Detailed discussions took place throughout 1986 which resulted in an agreement to field a candidate at the General Election which was expected to take place in 1987. The decision to contest the General Election was announced in October 1986 and a selection procedure introduced for the adoption of a suitable candidate. Mr. John Goodlad (who was a founder member of the Shetland Movement and had been Vice Chairman of the Shetland Movement since 1983) was unanimously selected as the OSM Prospective Parliamentary candidate.

The Political History of Orkney and Shetland
The traditional dominance of the Liberal Party in Orkney and Shetland politics can be seen from Table 1.

Table 1. Orkney and Shetland - General Election Statistics 1974-1983.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>SNP</th>
<th>OSM</th>
<th>Greens</th>
<th>Total votes cast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 1974</td>
<td>11,491 (62%)</td>
<td>4,186 (23%)</td>
<td>2,865 (15%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18,542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1974</td>
<td>9,877 (56%)</td>
<td>2,496 (14%)</td>
<td>2,175 (12%)</td>
<td>3,025 (17%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>17,572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1979</td>
<td>10,950 (56%)</td>
<td>4,140 (21%)</td>
<td>3,385 (17%)</td>
<td>935 (5%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1983</td>
<td>9,374 (46%)</td>
<td>5,224 (26%)</td>
<td>2,665 (13%)</td>
<td>3,147 (15%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20,410</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support for the Conservative and Labour parties is limited in Orkney and Shetland while the Scottish Nationalist vote has been variable. Given the strength

* MA Hons et M. Litt, Chief of Shetland Fishermen’s Association.

256
of the Liberal political tradition in Orkney and Shetland, it was clear that the OSM faced an uphill task, as a brand new political party entering national politics for the first time.

Aims of the Campaign
The OSM took the decision to contest the General Election in the full knowledge that it was highly unlikely that an OSM candidate could win the seat at a first attempt. In an early stage it was agreed that the objective of the campaign should be to achieve a credible result and thereby firmly place autonomy on the political agenda of Orkney and Shetland. It was agreed that the OSM would have failed if it did not save its deposit. A minimum electoral result of over 5% of all votes cast was therefore agreed to be an absolute minimum objective from the early part of the campaign. Provided this was achieved, it was acknowledged that the Movements would indeed have achieved an electoral victory if it could poll a similar number of votes (15%) as polled by the SNP, in 1983. It was also hoped that, by obtaining such a result, the OSM might be able to beat the Labour Party into third place.

The Position of the Scottish National Party (SNP)
Based on the fact that many of those people who had voted SNP in the past might be inclined to vote for an OSM candidate, it was agreed to hold discussions with the SNP. Although the OSM does not advocate an independent Scotland, it fully supports the principle of self determination for the Scottish people. The SNP in turn has of course always supported the principle of autonomy for Orkney and Shetland. As a result the SNP agreed not to contest the Orkney and Shetland seat.

The Campaign
From the time of formal adoption, the OSM Prospective Parliamentary Candidate travelled extensively between Orkney and Shetland. The OSM Manifesto was published in early May 1987. This Manifesto clearly set out the Movements’ policy on the central question of autonomy for the Islands in addition to policy statements on all other major national issues, e.g. Defence Policy, Health Service, Education, Nuclear Energy, etc. Throughout the campaign the OSM had to demonstrate that it had views on the wider issues affecting all British people and yet, at the same time, endeavouring to continually highlight autonomy as the key issue. In this way autonomy did become a key issue in the campaign.

The reaction of the other political parties to the OSM campaign was mixed. The Labour Party was the most critical of the OSM campaign, claiming that autonomy for Orkney and Shetland was simply a distraction away from the key issue of returning a socialist government to Westminster. This old fashioned centralist viewpoint was shared by the Conservative candidate. The Liberal Party incumbent generally took the line that the Liberal/SNP Alliance was offering a degree of decentralization and devolution which would meet the Movements’ aspirations. These could be achieved, it was argued, without the electorate hav-